

Roy & Kathi Merritt
Eric's House, Part II -- special people

Friday, January 29, 2010

Last month I sent pictures of our two high school graduates. Then school opening happened and we have been buried under crowds of people who want help with school fees, school books, school uniforms . . .

That has cooled down now, and so here come more pictures of the Eric's House bunch.

Special person number 1 — “Gwembe”.



Gwembe is the little guy on the left. Gwembe is mentally retarded. Doesn't talk much. He grins a lot and gives “thumbs up” to everyone he meets. He runs if he is travelling more than 100 yards.

Before he came to us, thugs battered him to mincemeat and a concerned person dragged him to Zimba hospital. When he recovered the hospital wanted to release him to *Somebody*—

anybody! Social services brought him to us. They knew nothing about him, and when anyone asked his name he only replied “Gwembe” – which is a tribal name for our part of Zambezi Valley.

I liked him immediately. People here can be brutal with mentally ill or retarded people. Every town has a few ragged, filthy, shaggy fellows shuffling through trash heaps for a snack. I wasn't just moved by compassion. I wanted our kids to learn that people like Gwembe are also valuable human beings, made in the image of God.

Gwembe has become popular, and fits in well most of the time. He plays with the two-year-olds, Hides behind the door and shouts “Boo”. He protects them and separates their little fights. He loves gadgets that flash or beep or unfold. Our older kids have learned to like him, return his thumbs up, and protect him from those who would be unkind.

Gwembe has some problems that need surgery. How do we get permission? I tried Social Services, the local court, the Chief medical officer, and just got passed around to the next office. We began to follow hints—where is his family? We finally traced them out—200 miles away at Siameja village deep in Gwembe valley. He had disappeared two years ago, and the family even planned a funeral for him, until they heard rumors he might be somewhere near Kalomo. After we told the family what we needed, Gwembe's older brother Kingwell, brought us a handwritten letter from Gwembe's father, with the date stamp of their local headman, giving permission for the surgery. Kingwell is the big guy in the picture. He is 25 years old and in grade 9.

The letter also told us Gwembe's real name, Kalombe Siakoole. We've called him Gwembe for so long, nothing is going to change here!

Another special boy - Gideon is the fellow on the right.



Gideon lived in nearby Kalomo. When his teachers noticed him limping to school every day, they reported his condition to the police.

The police drove out here that evening. They told us Gideon's aunt, a prominent business woman in Kalomo, was beating him every day, telling him she wanted him to run away. Families in towns here are flooded with unwelcome poor relatives, but few resort to this sort of violence. Gideon's home is in a village way out in the bush from Chinsali, a town 600 miles from here in northern Zambia. There's no way he could run home. Auntie's beatings got worse. She even whacked an iron rod on him the last couple of times she worked him over.

The police asked if they could hide Gideon here a few days while they dealt with Auntie. They did not want him in her house after they presented their charges!

So we kept him. A sweet, decent kid. When the police came with Gideon's uncle to take him back to Chinsali, it was a sad little farewell.

The boy with Gideon is David. A newspaper man brought David here a couple years ago, after finding the boy picking through trash cans for food. David has been a handful—high tempered, dirty mouthed, disrespectful to his teachers—he got into trouble almost every day his first year here. Things have improved a lot since then. He certainly has not achieve angel status, but he has defeated 80 percent of his demons. David and Gideon were best buddies during Gideon's "visit".